

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Bairnsdale — 23 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic
Research Officers: Dr P. Chen, Ms C. Tischler

Witnesses

Ms I A Cook, Manager Community Services, Building & Citizen Services East Gippsland Shire Council (affirmed);

Mr R Earles, Community Support Planner, East Gippsland Shire Council (affirmed),

Ms R James, Transport Project Coordinator – Let's get Connected, East Gippsland Shire Council (affirmed), and

Ms S McHugh, Transport Project Coordinator – Let's get Connected, Wellington Shire Council (affirmed)

The CHAIR — Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us today. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation, and I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee including submissions is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organization you represent today as well.

Ms McHUGH — My name is Sheryl Janine McHugh, I represent the Transport Connections Project and Wellington Shire Council today.

Ms JAMES — My name is Rhonda James from Nungurner. I am East Gippsland Shire, Transport Project Coordinator.

Ms COOK — I am Isabel Ann Cook I am the manager community building and citizen services from East Gippsland Shire Council.

Mr EARLES — Ryan Earles from [ADDRESS REMOVED] Bairnsdale, community support planner at the East Gippsland Shire Council.

The CHAIR — Thank you, please continue with your submission.

Ms COOK — Thank you for providing council with the opportunity to make an oral presentation for this important inquiry which clearly has far reaching implications for the future of Victoria's rural towns and community. I will go through our presentation with Ryan on behalf of council and then Rhonda and Sheryl will do their's immediately afterwards with the intention being that we arrive at the point with 10 minutes to spare.

Council's evidence and perspective of this matter is derived from the position of experience in advocacy, partnership development, facilitation, community support and leadership. This translates of course to the role of auspice agency, and this of course carries a clear cost to council in a number of government funded projects which have the potential to achieve sustainable outcomes for the benefit of the community both at the grassroots level and at the strategic level.

Two projects that we have recently carried out that have particular reference to young people one, the youth CABD project which stands for Community Alliance and Action Building Demonstration Project. This provided a number of invaluable outcomes as well as a clearer understanding of youth issues. One of these is community profile which is a detailed description of young people in East Gippsland, and we provided the CD of that. Also the CRAYV committee which was a wonderful outcome, it stands for Creating Real Actions with Youth Vision. This was extensive consultation with the CRAYV committee and really it formed out perspective on youth issues.

Arising from the youth CBD project, was another one youth development project, it was really an extension of the funding. The aims of this project is a development of an East Gippsland regional youth strategy to address prevailing youth issues. We like to take a regional approach rather than a specifically council approach and this is with the aim of partnerships and working effectively with other involved service providers. Also part of this project is the works within the framework which enable CRAYV to become a sustainable entity.

Do I stay or do I go? Not always a clear decision making process, but our work with CRAYV indicated that our young people have some very real issues around opportunity. These issues are the determinants for the next move in life. An important one, enfranchisement. Young people have limited opportunity to have a voice and have access to decision making environments which can influence governments at all levels. Here is the president of the CRAYV with our mayor, Councillor Jane Rowe. Education and training: Limited availability of places for tertiary level education. You will have heard all these before, but I will go through the list. Limited traineeships, limited apprenticeship. A reluctance of some employers to take either of the above. I think that is a significant problem, and I think that has been confirmed today by some of the things that we have been hearing.

Also another issue, social stigma attached to taking up non tertiary level further education. This sort of social stigma can definitely be more pronounced in smaller communities. Employment opportunities: reluctance of some employers to take on young people, maybe the logistics of the capacity to take on risks, taking on a young person is often perceived as a risk. This is most unfortunate and we felt had ramifications. The reluctance of some employers to provide a culturally appropriate workplace for young indigenous people. I think our indigenous community have not been mentioned much this afternoon, and I think they do have some very specific issues and it is a challenge for employers to set up an appropriate workplace. I think we really do have to come to grips with that.

Lack of employment vacancies, people staying on in the workforce longer, do not all look at me. Independence: the ability to live independently relies on affordable and shared housing opportunity. Availability of transport options and of course, access to an income. Housing options really are quite limited. The transport presentation by Rhonda and Sheryl will address the transport issues shortly. Health and wellbeing: how robust are the opportunities for social activity and support for well being? These are issues around strengthen and family and friends network.

Communication options and access to them, we do have communication challenges which I guess are slowly improving, but the uptake of computers and internet access is relatively low in our community. Then there are things like trees and mountains. Entertainment options and the ability to access them. Sporting options and the ability to access those too. Social infrastructure, this we refer here to places which focus on art, entertainment and music. There is a picture of the CRAYV committee doing something.

Also this was not reported I do not think through CRAYV, but I guess this is something that I feel quite strongly about. What were the opportunities through the middle school years for the metropolitan experience. I think it really is very daunting to go to live in Melbourne. How do you actually work the tram, and get a ticket and that sort of thing. I think the more opportunities there are through the middle school years for trips to Melbourne and just getting on and off trams, staying in Melbourne, and work experience, I think the school and TAFE who do offer these opportunities, should be commended. I do think process of familiarisation is important. I would like to introduce Ryan now, who is going to tell us about the young person's perspective from a personal point of view.

Mr EARLES — I am actually one of those young persons who have returned to Bairnsdale after moving to Melbourne and it was interesting to hear the comments already made because that hit the nail on the head. I went to Melbourne for 12 months not really knowing what to expect. I went because it seemed that it was what everyone else was doing and I was interested in audio and visual technology so decided to take on a course and just give it a go.

I had no real supports down there, I just went off my own back and just to see what it was like because everyone else was doing it so I thought I would give it a go. After a year I returned back to Bairnsdale and I think what Steve and Sally mentioned about self esteem issues, is really spot on. I spent about six months after that unemployed. Not really interested in pursuing anything. I then went on to a job as factory hand something I was not really interested in, but I thought I would give it a go anyway. After six months of unemployment, I participated in the communities small jobs program, which was a three months job placement. That was at the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network, and from that I have learnt some good work experience and I've got ongoing casual work. Eventually leading to an IT traineeship with the East Gippsland Shire for that. That was thank to certain work colleagues in the early days caring enough about my personal development at that stage.

After completing my traineeship, I have now got a certificate for an IT media behind me and I have moved into a new role with the council as community support planner, which is where I am at now. Where to from here? I guess I could see myself going back to the city now that I have got decent work experience behind me, and most likely come back to Bairnsdale or this area later on in life, after going back to Melbourne or wherever, to see whatever else is out there.

Ms COOK — I would like to confirm what a wonderful job Ryan does and what a pleasing experience and satisfying experience it has been for us to progress his professional development and what a great asset he is to our organization. It has been a great experience.

Mr INGRAM — So Ryan you are still on your traineeship?

Ms COOK — No, he has got a proper job. Do I return? That is probably a much clearer decision making process post tertiary study or travel which has been initiated by some level of desire or preparedness to return. The determining factors with respect to this around a career, the availability of work and career opportunity in whatever

rural area you are interested in. Also opportunities for further professional development and training with respect to this. I know that people in medicine and the allied professions, it is important for them to have continued opportunities for training.

What services? The availability of a range of relevant services such as medical and ancillary services which support young people thinking about settling down and starting a family. Either child care opportunities and early education choices. What is the infrastructure like? Are there opportunities for affordable housing? Can we move, buy into the housing market in whatever rural community it is. What transport options are there? We cannot afford two cars. What are the health services and the education facilities? Health and well being. Opportunities for social connectedness including, and these will be the same as we referred to before, entertainment, sporting and social infrastructure, networking opportunities for differing demographics. We cannot just standardize one set of networking requirements. Different people have different preferred ways of working.

The strength of the existing family and friends network in the particular rural community. Strategies, well this links back to my first line on council's position on advocacy, active partnership development and leadership with the intention of nurturing admitted strategic regional approach development of the East Gippsland Regional Youth Strategy. In respect to the terms of this inquiry with particular emphasis on increasing the number of tertiary education places and pathways, increasing traineeships and apprenticeships, increasing employment and further professional development opportunities and increasing access to affordable housing and transport options.

Fostering community support and social opportunity to support connectedness and of course, investment and social infrastructure. Support for mechanisms which enable young people to feel that they have a voice, are in power and can make a difference. In conclusion I would like to say that through recognising the power of strategic regional approach through partnership, advocacy and leadership East Gippsland Shire Council is well positioned to make areal difference in planning for the future, where investment will surely return a significant dividend. This is of course predicated upon the opportunity for strong and effective working relationships between state and local government. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.

Ms JAMES — Thanks again too for giving us the opportunity to speak to the inquiry. Myself and Sheryl work on a joint project between the East Gippsland and Wellington Shires, the Let's Get Connected Gippsland East Transport Connections Project that is state funded. It is one of the known transport connections across Victoria. The first stage of the three year pilot Transport Connections Project finishes at the end of this year. The objectives of our project in Gippsland East is much different to the other eight projects across the state. Lets Get Connected is based on a capacity building aspect whereby working in partnerships with key stakeholders and community groups to find flexible transport solutions to a wide range of transport initiatives.

Today we can only address the Inquiry's terms of reference questions 1 and 3, as question 2 is not in the scope of our project. Here is a map of the two LGAs, East Gippsland and Wellington. As you can see we have 30,000 square kilometres between the two LGAs - 20,000 are East Gippsland. We've mainly got V-Line transport that services towns along the Princes Highway through to Melbourne. As you can see by the map, the other communities are not connected to public transport.

Factors that influence young people: Do I stay: owning a car is a major way of getting around. Access to public transport and access to affordable transport. Do I go? No flexible licensing to get to jobs and education and we will talk a little bit more to that towards the end of this presentation. There is no reliable transport to post secondary education. There is no or limited public transport to local jobs. There is no public transport to social, sporting, recreational activities.

Ms McHUGH — Our project also conducted a transport survey at the end of last year. We surveyed some 796 Gippsland East secondary students, aged between 14 and 17 years of age. It has really given us a wealth of information on which to build on now in terms of making some recommendations and finding some local solutions. What we did find was quite a number of comments, some of which we knew anecdotally, but others which have been backed up and some which have even shocked us. I will not go through them in great detail. 63% said a lack of transport stopped them getting around. This next statistic was a really interesting one because we have heard a lot about the right of passage to move away from Melbourne, but 61% of students said they would prefer to stay and remain and find work and educational opportunities locally. So that was a real shock for us to find that statistic. 72% would like to find a job close to home. However, these were the issues when asked about: when considering post-secondary choices what would impact on their decisions and choices the most. 68% would need access to

public transport to maximise those opportunities. Another 81% said that owning a car, would impact on their decisions, choices and opportunities. 73% indicated that they would need to relocate for work, which is pretty much backs up what everyone else has been saying.

All of these things impact on young people in a number of ways. It also indicated that not all young people wish to leave home, or the local area, but many are forced to by the inability to access opportunities. Something else I would like to say about youth survey. Part of those were conducted in focus groups directly with the young people and some of the anecdotal evidence was fed back to us through those focus groups. There was quite a bit of evidence of risk taking behaviour because of lack of transport, hitchhiking, jumping on the back of a goods train, that was coming in to town just so they can go and visit their mate. Those sorts of things and whilst we have documented some of those things there's quite strong evidence that there was risk taking place.

This is not a new graph or flow chart to anyone, and it has been around for a long time. We have adapted it a little bit, we have taken a little bit of poetic licence there. It really says it all and I think the point we want to make about rural car dependence, and the initiatives the state government introduced on in the last couple of years around transport, is that we are still very much focused on metropolitan and regional transport and there is really not a lot of work going into the rural and remote areas. To make that point, Traralgon is our regional centre here in Gippsland and that's very much where the thinking of rural transport is. There are 13 services into Traralgon each day from Melbourne and out of Traralgon each day. You move 50 kilometres up the road to Sale, we have got three. None of those services are at peak times for where people can access work or job opportunities.

That is the difference we are looking at. So whilst you can say Gippsland has got a number of transport outcomes, it does not translate to rural and remote communities, that is the point I wanted to make there. Transport solutions, we have tried to look at post school and student travel. We have developed a process now for secondary school age children to access school buses. Now whilst this was announced back in 2003 by Jacinta Allen as a free travel option for students, it was not ever operationalised in terms of giving that information to school principals, to backing that up with the Local LLENS employment, networks or anything like that. So what our project has done is brought together a range of partners, we have brought together all of our registered training organizations. We have actually worked through the process of how we can actually get kids on the spare seating capacity on buses.

I think we have managed to do a really good job on that. Here in Gippsland it has now been recognised as an opportunity to roll that out state wide and we are looking at some of the other implications that go with that, such as school bus contracts, the capacity of the school bus network to carry additional passengers. But I think you really need to move that to the next level. We have to look at as a right travel for TAFE students and post secondary school students. At the moment they are only eligible where there is spare seating capacity. Now in the Sale network of buses we have some spare seating capacity and we are trying to maximise that, but here in Bairnsdale there is virtually no capacity on those buses. There is less of a willingness on behalf of some of the schools to make that happen. So we need to push some of those initiatives to make them worthwhile for young people.

Ms JAMES — We have also supplied further information about the school buses in the package provided for you.

Ms McHUGH — The other key point that we really want to see changed is we need to have services at peak times. We are still stuck in the public transport mode which is very welfare dependent, welfare dominated, shopper services at 10 o'clock, 2 o'clock in between the school run. We are not seeing any services at peak times which get people to jobs and schools and work opportunities at 8.30 in the morning and home again at 5 o'clock. So we are really leaving these people with no choices but to own and maintain a car. The main service centres, Sale and Bairnsdale in particular, Lakes Entrance and Orbost are areas that have large chunks of population which need access to services at peak times, and that is not just for young people, that is the whole community in general.

Ms JAMES — Public transport to Key Educational and Employment Services: Sheryl and I have also put together a list of the types of public transport solutions for Gippsland East. The list is extensive. We need return daily services at peak times into our major service centres. Importantly fares need to be affordable. In your package as well, I have put together a list of what public transport is available in East Gippsland and its fare structure. So if you want to travel from Mallacoota to Orbost, what the price would cost and on a V-line coach service, and also what it would cost in a taxi.

For example in Orbost it is a \$45 return fare to get to Bairnsdale and a concession is \$22, that is obviously not affordable for young people that need to travel to Bairnsdale for employment and further education. The project has also negotiated an affordable transport solution for Orbost TAFE students with the private Catholic Secondary School. The private school bus was exclusive to Orbost Nagle College students travelling to Bairnsdale. The return fare negotiated for Orbost TAFE students was \$5 return. This year 2006, young people studying or wishing to study at TAFE were familiar with access to the service and were planning around that when selecting their future studies. Unfortunately Nagle College made a business decision to downsize this bus, without consulting with the TAFE College or our project and the LLENS. So now we have nine young people who are transport disadvantaged who had planned their studies around getting to TAFE on the Nagle College bus.

Owning a car is quite expensive and as said before, rural and remote communities live in a car dependent culture. Fuel costs are going to get much bigger which will further disadvantage our communities. Flexible Transport Options: most of our young people move around on school buses whereby school buses are for primary and secondary school aged students only. After hours transport: we do not have public transport services here in East Gippsland for young people to get to part time employment, sporting activities, social activities, study activities, also weekend and holidays. A list of solutions is included with the supporting documentation supplied. We also require summer services to our beaches at Seaspray, Cape Conran and Lakes Entrance.

Aboriginal Driver Education Program: this is a new initiative being facilitated by our project. There is more detailed information included in the supporting documentation. Basically it is a program to assist aboriginal people from 16 years upwards to obtain their drivers licence and to provide education about owning and maintaining a vehicle. There is a fairly detailed document in your package about the program. The restricted licensing program was mentioned earlier. This is about young people holding a restricted licence who are under the age of 18, to travel to specific places only, such as employment and further education. We've been speaking to Vic Roads about this concept. Apparently there's a model in South Australia I think, however we will need to do further research and have further dialogue with VicRoads to progress this concept.

Ms McHUGH — Accessible public transport is also another issue, we know that in the community that there are a number of people with mobility issues, and that includes young people with disabilities, as well as older people with mobility issues. Lots of young single mums in our communities with prams and pushers, who still cannot get on to a bus, even if there was one. So another initiative which we have raised with the relevant departments is to have a percentage of our school bus fleet that is actually accessible. Our school bus fleet is really the only other services that are used out of hours to provide our shopping services and other transport initiatives.

Even our V-Line services in to and out of East Gippsland are non accessible, including our trains. If you are in a wheelchair for instance, you are still forced to travel in the baggage car of a train in East Gippsland to get to Melbourne on a first class ticket.

The last point we want to make is around integrated planning, particularly integrated transport planning. We think that state government needs to move to this sort of transport planning and I think transport connections projects have demonstrated that across the state. We need our local transport to have a focus on access and mobility. We need it to be around service centres, we need it to be at particular times. We need to move away from models, as I said before, of a welfare transport system.

The other important point to make about integrated transport planning, is that it needs to link with other sectors, such a health and education and local government planning. If you look at the list of partners that we have behind each and every one of our initiatives it involves all of those sectors and everyone here today has come from different sectors of the community. Everyone of them has put transport on their list, without doubt. So it is much, much broader than the people who actually provide transport at the moment. It really is a community issue and we need to have community solutions.

The CHAIR — If I can ask Ann, you talked about social connectedness and networking opportunities for different demographics, can you tell us some of the programs that you might be offering in that particular area at the moment to actually tray and give those opportunities to the community?

Ms COOK — Council is not providing any of those services specifically. What we are more interested in, or what we have the capacity to deliver, is the regional youth strategy which we would be looking at advocating for

those services, or looking at different ways in which those support networks and associated activities can be provided. Council's role is seen very much in planning and facilitation. We do not actually provide services.

Mr INGRAM — Very good presentation, thank you.

The CHAIR — With the transport connections program are you intending now that the flexible transport solutions program has come through last week in the transport liveability statement, do you think that will provide an ongoing way for your communities to be able to actually improve the transport connections that are actually there now, and build on the work and research that you have done?

Ms McHUGH — Absolutely, I think that is a clear recognition of where we have come from in terms of transport connections project and the \$20m that's been announced with that package, we will certainly be applying for some ongoing funding to build on the work that we have done already and try and expand some of the solutions that we have got in place. But as I said, each initiative that we come up with is in partnership with a range of other organizations and it is so important to recognise the role of all those different communities in transport planning.

Ms COOK — From council's perspective we see this as particularly successful project. We are really hopeful that we are going to be able to continue with the work of this and that it is placed in East Gippsland. I think that the geographic do not lend themselves for the project to be sitting further down towards Melbourne. There are a lot of kilometres after Traralgon.

The CHAIR — It is very much about disadvantage.

Ms COOK — Absolutely, it needs to be in the remote areas.

Ms McHUGH — I think our communities too do not fit the current funding model for transport services and never will. We can never justify a service based on numbers and distance. We just do not have the numbers and we have the greater distances. So we have to find a transport measure that recognises the need for a service beyond getting from A to B. It needs to be connecting people for other reasons and we need to recognise that and build that into our submissions. This is very difficult when you have transport authorities who work on a formulae basis and they do not look outside of that for a solution. We have really tried to highlight this inequity through our project and the work that we are doing now with our state wide colleagues.

Mr MITCHELL — Trust me when I say we know exactly what you mean.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that and I hope it does make a difference actually it would be wonderful for our communities. Any further questions. Thank you very much you will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time. You may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses Withdrew